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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that examined teachers' perceptions of and experiences in shared-governance schools are presented in this paper. Data were collected from interviews with over 21 teachers and students in 4 schools that are members of the Georgia-based League of Professional Schools, the impetus of which was the Program for School Improvement, or PSI. Findings indicate that participation in PSI resulted in: improved quality and greater frequency of communication; increased teacher participation and paperwork; no increase in parental and student participation; a clarified and unified school philosophy; an indirect impact on classroom instruction through clarification of instructional issues and promotion of teacher collaboration; improved professional-growth opportunities; and a belief in the shared decision-making process. The following recommendations for implementing shared governance are made: (1) attain some degree of cohesion prior to implementation; (2) build in sufficient preparation time; (3) plan ongoing group development; (4) clarify roles and responsibilities; (5) maintain fair representation and accurate reporting; (6) focus on collaboration across all parties; (7) combine easily resolved and long-range goals; (8) design conflict resolution channels; (9) have realistic expectations; (10) maintain a low profile in active decision making; (11) be willing to surrender power; and (12) realize that shared governance is a process for instructional improvement. (Contains 16 references.) (LMI)

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# Tabula Rasa: Case Studies of Teacher Voice

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Tabula Rasa: Case Studies of Teacher Voice

Roland Barth (1988) has suggested that a principal's primary challenge is that of tapping teachers' expertise and experience in order to yield enlightened decisions and better educational programs, yet we currently have little insight into the crucial factors of shared decision making in schools. In fact, the complementary role of the principal in such schools and the specifics of how to implement shared governance in schools remains largely uninvestigated (Simpson, 1989; Immegart, 1988); extant studies provide only general descriptions of teacher advocacy (Karant, 1989; Lieberman, 1988), teachers' decision-making domains, and successful shared governance initiatives (Hart, 1990). Among the significant questions that remain unanswered are the following: What are the patterns of organization, communication, and procedure in shared governance schools? What is the quality and degree of teacher involvement in shared governance schools? What are the characteristics of effective principals in such schools? And, what are the results of sharing authority with teachers, thus encouraging them to exercise control of their professional environment (e.g., Osterman, 1989)?

In a review of research on teacher participation in shared decision making, Conley (1991) detailed the specific need for more field-based studies of the dynamics of shared decision making, or shared governance, in schools. To date, the only related publication is work by Glickman (1993), which outlines philosophical and policy models for shared governance but does not detail its field-based research on shared governance or discuss empirically-derived leadership practices for shared governance and their impacts on teachers (current reports of research conducted within the League are available from the PSI offices).

This study is a contribution to the field of education in its attempts to restructure American schools for greater effectiveness. It describes teachers' perceptions of how teachers become empowered in shared governance schools; this includes, in part, descriptions of principals' related leadership practices. This is a unique contribution to the educational literature; no in-depth or comprehensive descriptions of how shared governance is played out in existing schools (nor how teachers' lives are affected) has been published (Allen, 1993). In fact, in the few existing related studies only scant data-based descriptions of the critical aspects of the principal's role in implementing shared governance have appeared (Bredeson, 1989). Second, this study is an empirical report of the actual experiences of teachers in shared governance schools (cf. Malen & Ogawa, 1988). As such, it describes the teachers' perspectives

experiences of teachers in shared governance schools (cf. Malen & Ogawa, 1988). As such, it describes the teachers' perspectives on empowerment by way of the impacts (cultural, professional, affective, and cognitive) and the leadership of principals who promote such impacts.

## Method

Data for the study were collected from teachers working in schools which are members of the Georgia-based League of Professional Schools (the impetus of which was the Program for School Improvement, or PSI). The League's work in the area of shared governance is known internationally and is, by far, considered to be the most extensive and most successful program in shared governance worldwide. Data for the study were collected from teachers in four League schools (there are 52 schools in the League) where the tenets of PSI are being implemented. In total over 21 teachers and students participated in lengthy open-ended interviews. Questions elicited detailed descriptions of school structures and leadership practices and their impacts in the words of the teachers and the students.

Using a hermeneutic-phenomenological inquiry approach and protocol, we explored dimensions of participants' voice within this intensive program focused on the implementation of shared governance and participative decision-making in the schools. Using field data, we examined the lived experiences of teachers and students and then drew comparisons among the teams' experiences as they worked on school-wide improvement projects. Our analysis reveals successful approaches as well as cautions to implementing shared governance structures in schools.

## Findings

Communication and Climate Participants across this study reported increased quality and frequency of communication both horizontally (between and among faculty), within and across departmental and grade level lines, and vertically (between faculty and administration) in a two-way flow of ideas and concerns ("We were all kind of in our own little world. Administration was up there on the mountain and we were down in the valley and felt that we couldn't go to them and give our opinions; or, if they made a decision, or something was coming down, we just had to accept it. But now, we can have input." "It's not so much second-hand news; we get it less filtered out. I think we get more first-hand information; we are able to go right to the source more because of shared governance."). These increases were attributed to shared governance's increased organizational and structural channels (i.e., teachers' increased awareness of what channels to use and how concerns will be

handled) and to increased feelings of openness and accessibility resulting from these established channels ("I participate more in the process of decision making. I feel that I have more input and that my input is going to be listened to and maybe even acted upon." "Now we do have a specific person to go to, so people in my area and people outside of my area will come and ask on specific issues and will say 'When you get in the leadership meeting, mention this' and you do."). The quality of communication extended to increased instructional talk (mainly about curriculum matters) and focussed on important faculty issues (scheduling, professional matters), as well as more trivial concerns such as copy machines ("No matter how strange or how ridiculous it may appear or sound, ideas will not go unheeded or [un]heard or at least given an ear to." "We concentrate now on the most important stuff, not on a lot of things. We concentrate on quality rather than on quantity.").

These increases in frequency and quality of interaction often, but not always, fostered faculty collegiality ("It has given me a way to work with other teachers and maybe get more or other teachers involved with me in planning and thinking and working cooperatively toward a goal.") and improvements in school climate and teacher morale ("We are a closer knit faculty now. We have little activities and things we didn't do in the past--baby showers, wedding showers, and that kind of thing." "I see a much warmer, much more closely knit kind of cohesive faculty, particularly the faculty with the administration, as a result of this. Many of us look forward to expanding this program even more."). Efficient communication also seems to have encouraged greater focus on instructional issues ("I am always conscious of what we are trying to accomplish; this is the mindset of what I am supposed to be thinking about, so I try especially the cross-curriculum ideas, letting the kids work cooperatively, and those kinds of things. When I sit down to do my lesson, I try to think, 'Okay, how can I incorporate higher order thinking skills into this week's lesson plans?'").

Instances where faculty morale decreased were consistently associated with communication that did not include "authenticity". In other words, in these cases teachers had open channels and were heard but did not feel that their opinions were valued and acted upon. These circumstances were always conjoined with governance structures which teachers felt were not truly representative of teacher voice ("I think when administration has an idea or has a feeling about something, that somehow gets buffaloed through."). Representation was perceived as poor because (1) leaders were appointed by administration (perceived as favoritism) ("A lot of teachers feel there are different echelons or groups that are treated a little differently. Some people have a little more clout than others.") or (2)

administration controlled shared governance structures through composition (procedural, departmental, or racial) or through limitations on decisions ("The principles of shared governance as I understand them are not implemented here. We have stymied representation. Everyone knows what leadership wants to happen. We have a voice in the liaison groups but it doesn't go any further. The liaisons won't take it up." "I personally think administration needs to back out of as active and as visual and as vocal participation as it currently has."). In these circumstances, teacher willingness to participate was somewhat curbed due to a lack of trust in or fear of administrative response. ("There is a fear of going against the established order because retribution will occur. Faculty members feel they have to be cautious about what they say, to whom, and worry about how it will be recorded."). Participants indicated that quality shared governance is directly dependent on administration's openness and willingness to change ("Because your shared governance is only going to be as good, really and truly, as your administration is going to allow that to be.").

In all cases, teachers reported that social interaction had improved at the superficial level (parties, food, birthdays). Deeper levels of friendship and social sharing remained good or improved because shared governance promoted increased interaction across grade levels and departments ("PSI has brought about contacts with people you might not have been in contact with. In fact, the people in my group, we don't work on the same floor, we might never see each other, we never would have known each other's names. Now you will speak and you will talk about PSI or things that you normally wouldn't have talked about if you were not in the same group.").

Participation and Roles Participants noted few limited areas of concern not routinely subject to review through shared governance processes. Personnel decisions, budgetary expenditures, scheduling, and student discipline were mentioned, however, as areas where shared governance might be expanded. Participants were split equally on their views; one half indicated a desire for more voice on these matters, and the other half did not want responsibility and preferred administrative control to continue in these areas. There were no reported areas of current shared decision making that participants wished to return to administrative control.

All participants indicated that shared governance promoted increased participation by faculty in decision-making processes and provided participants with a reason to participate ("Now teachers are allowed the opportunity to participate in decision making. Decisions are not forced upon them. It is real participation."). In later stages of shared governance

development teachers indicated that common annoyances such as paperwork and required meetings dropped in frequency by as much as 20 to 50 percent. In the initial stages of shared governance implementation meetings and paperwork often increased. In situations where teachers believed goals were being accomplished and progress was being made, these inconveniences were tolerated. However, frustration surfaced when these increased demands did not produce accompanying results ("Maybe PSI necessitates more meetings; I don't know. But I do know we are meeting more and I get grumblings from my teachers about that.").

Increased participation among faculty often required individuals to assume leadership roles when they had not previously been active in school-based decision-making ("I have found classroom teachers who were not normally actively involved in the total school process and had a rather apathetic attitude become very involved with PSI."). All participants expressed high degrees of satisfaction with both opportunities and involvement in such roles. Occasional references were made to confusion generated by role and responsibility conflict. That is, responsibilities of existing structures such as standing committees and departmental chairs did not always smoothly interface with shared governance structures ("I think people need to come to an understanding of what professionalism is and the role of each body, administration and faculty. What is our role?"). Occasionally shared governance structures replaced or supplemented traditional responsibilities or infringed upon what may have been viewed as territorial rights ("Certain responsibilities that traditionally have been department chair responsibilities have been diminishing; they are responsibilities I feel should be department chair's responsibilities." "I am not even real sure what my responsibilities are because certain responsibilities that I had I don't have any longer."). Such conflicts were viewed as temporary and attributed to the initial stages of implementation rather than to shared governance/existing structure incompatibilities.

<u>Parental and Student Participation</u> Two weak areas of participation were seen throughout the study. No increases attributable to league membership were cited regarding authentic parent or student involvement in shared governance. Parental involvement in general was limited to corollary entities such as newsletters, business-school partnerships, volunteer programs, and parent-teacher organizations. Any increases in parental participation were credited to administrative leadership expertise ("I think our principal has brought a different tone to the idea of being a principal. He has a good rapport with the parents who come out.").

Student involvement in shared governance was similarly dependent on traditional structures such as honor societies and student governments. The degree of student participation often was determined by either administrative sanction or by the force of personality of the individual participating students. In many instances, students were completely unaware of their rights to decision making roles within the governance bodies of the schools and, contrary to the precepts of shared decision making, were neither included in nor represented by these bodies. In the few situations where student participation was "allowed or encouraged", student participation centered on or was limited to "student issues" such as dress codes and snack machines even though the students interviewed indicated the existence of widespread student concern regarding more weighty instructional matters (grading policies and standards, variation in instructional techniques, increased curricular offerings) ("I would expand the variety of classes that are offered. Elective means that you are choosing your curriculum and it doesn't necessarily have to be something that is not academic. I would loosen the curriculum so it wouldn't be so structured and uniform. I don't believe that true learning and knowledge gaining can be structured and measured." "I knew one class where we started something new every day, every single day it was something new and we never caught up." "If it [the grading scale] did go to 93 [for an A], I think we would work harder. People probably would work harder.").

Impacts on Philosophy Shared governance appears to have both a clarifying effect and a unifying effect on school philosophy. ("I felt like once it was written down on paper, then it is not just something that is assumed we all know." "We are moving as a unit. It is not the administrator or administration making decisions. It is a whole unit making decisions."). These effects emerged at various times during implementation but were most immediate and most satisfactorily emergent when sufficient preparatory group building had taken place prior to implementation. Participants indicated a belief that such preparatory work was essential to philosophical cohesion and smooth transition. Teachers also noted an increased awareness of and commitment to personal philosophies of educational improvement ("I believe what we are becoming more aware of is that we have got to aim to be more professional. I believe we are becoming more aware of our own shortcomings and maybe shortcomings of the faculty in general." "I believe that there is across the faculty a greater awareness of the need for teachers to be involved in the process of changing education.").

Impacts on Instruction In all instances, shared governance had indirect impact on classroom instruction through clarification of instructional issues and through promotion of

teacher collaboration ("I think through the leadership team we have set some goals as a faculty that have had positive effects on the way we teach and on our classrooms." "I feel very comfortable going into the science department and saying, 'Okay, give me a real-life instance how this is used'--and I probably wouldn't have if we hadn't sat around and discussed what we were going to do in the leadership team."). Direct impacts such as increases in democratic classroom management or increased action on student voice in instructional matters were not attributed to shared governance practices. These types of changes were attributed to individual teacher personalities and administration/central office initiatives or decrees. ("The changes that have taken place have, to this point, been through the administration more than through PSI." "We have gone from leveled homogeneous grouping to virtually heterogeneous, but basically I think it was handed down from the central office."). It is anticipated that direct impacts resulting from shared governance influence may become more evident as shared governance programs age and evolve.

Impacts on Professional Growth Opportunities The single area of improvement given greatest significance and unanimously attributed to shared governance structures by participants was the area of professional growth opportunities, particularly staff development. Participants indicated substantial improvements in the variety, quality, and appropriateness of professional activities available. Many cited specific league programs they had attended and found beneficial. ("Oh, it is a lot more. We have had several things through PSI that we have attended. I have learned a lot more.") Although some variation was found in the inception and generation of staff development topics (teacher-generated vs. administrator/central office generated), in every instance, teachers believed that staff development was based on student and/or teacher needs and site-specific professional growth ("As far as PSI is concerned, that has increased the opportunities for professional growth. Opportunities are there and are made available and there are a lot of suggestions for staff development--PSI suggested and Executive Committee suggested."). Participants also indicated a willingness to evaluate and express opinions regarding the activities and believed such opinions would be accepted and utilized, indirectly or directly, in future staff development planning.

Cognitive and Affective Effects on Teachers Participants disclosed a wide range of initial thoughts and feelings towards shared governance prior to implementation (anxiety, reservation, enthusiasm) with movement toward comfort and acceptance as the program progressed ("Especially I have more self worth and being more of a decision maker and having a right

to make decisions and have my voice heard." "I kind of thought this is another thing that someone has come up with that we're going to jump on the bandwagon--but now I think that it really has helped. I see that it has helped definitely and it has helped us become more open with each other." "I came in with a negative attitude about administration and since I have been allowed to participate in decision making and I see why things are the way that they are instead of just here it is deal with it I feel a lot better about my job and about what I do here."). The process of participation engendered a further variety of thoughts and feelings which could be attributed to the quality and success of the implementation experiences. Participants whose high expectations were fulfilled by rapid progress and successful experiences indicated a high degree of satisfaction with shared governance ("Being part of the decision making thing--if you are part of the decision making team--it gives you a sense of importance." "When I was first introduced to the concept I thought, 'Oh, yeah, we will sit there and say what we want but it won't get done.'--and it hasn't been that way. Sometimes our decision is not what the administration particularly would decide."). Participants who experienced less satisfactory implementation and delayed or stymied program success indicated varying degrees of disillusionment ("Even if there is nothing else, people are griping 'What is the purpose of PSI if it's not going to happen in a very expedient manner?' The process is still not happening fast enough for a lot of people.").

However, even when participants indicated some degree of dissatisfaction or disillusionment with shared governance as it had been implemented or is functioning in their particular organization, these participants expressed a firm belief in the concept of self governance and the value of the experience. All participants expressed a willingness themselves and perceived a willingness among their peers, regardless of circumstances, to vote in favor of continuing the shared governance process ("I voted against shared governance if that tells you anything. Now I would probably vote for PSI.").

## Suggestions and Cautions

During the last few years, many districts have begun to decentralize operations, to implement site-based management and various forms of shared decision making in their efforts to restructure schools. University programs for teachers and administrators have followed suit by incorporating related concepts and theory in their preparation programs. Recent national conferences have featured teacher leadership, shared governance, and shared decision making sessions among their offerings. Widespread interest in this area is evident among

educational practitioners and scholars and is expected to develop significantly over the next few years. Furthermore, as the nature of the principalship develops along the lines of facilitating and empowering approaches to leadership vis-a-vis teachers, such studies as this will become especially appropriate as bases for preparation in the school principalship. Currently, there exists no literature that focuses on the leadership of effective principals in shared governance schools and the impacts of this leadership on teachers, yet practicing administrators are frequently asked by state educational bureaucracies and local districts to implement shared governance without guidelines for doing so. Finally, such findings will be of great assistance to staff development trainers responsible for providing leadership training to school administrators.

The following suggestions and cautions for administrative practice can be derived from the current study:

1. Before shared governance is attempted, there must be some degree of cohesion, willingness, and cultural affinity among all involved faculty, staff, administrators, and central office personnel. Shared governance can enhance these characteristics but it does not create these characteristics.

2. Build in sufficient preparation time for group development, trust building, and a thorough understanding of the tenets of shared governance prior to implementation.

3. Plan on-going group development and how-to sessions (e.g., What should the executive council do?)

4. Discuss and decide roles and responsibilities; avoid turf struggles.

5. Emphasize authentic participation and continued trust building through fair representation and accurate reporting.

6. Focus on collaboration and avoid isolation by establishing lines of communication across liaisons, cliques, and splinter groups.

7. Discuss realistic expectations and realize that change is slow--this may limit frustration and impatience.

8. Plan for sustained excitement and a continued vision of the possibilities by focusing on critical issues and important concerns in a mix of easily resolved goals and more long-range goals.

9. Design conflict resolution channels to avoid revolving door issues that get constantly tabled and to discourage lobbying and filibustering.

10. Realize that ingrained traditions of administrative power and perceived responsibility remain greater than initial shared governance attempts; therefore, maintain a low profile in active decision-making.

11. Administrators must be willing to surrender power and become one vote among many in order to avoid identification of administration preferences as program mandates.

12. Most importantly, shared governance is a process for instructional improvement, not a remedy for conflicting vectors, social inequalities, policy inequities or poor relationships among educators.

Sergiovanni (1991) has said that "collegiality is an important strategy for bringing about the kinds of connections that make schools work and work well" (p. 138). It is possible that educators have failed--or, at best, met with mixed success--in their attempts to initiate more active teacher participation because principals lack the needed leadership skills (Goodlad, 1984) or lack some forms of basic knowledge essential to planning and change in shared governance operations (Carman, 1987; Gladder, 1990; Little, 1986). This study offers some clues to the reasons for lack of success in as well as several paths to success in shared governance. The findings implicitly offer (1) suggestions for principal leadership in empowering educators, and (2) a grounded view of the emotional, psychological, and behavioral impacts of shared decision making on teachers. The study also describes the potential for developing a collaborative, reflective, problem-solving environment in schools.

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